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MASSACHUSETTS' LAKERS

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***A Waiting Challenge***

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## MASSACHUSETTS' LAKERS

### A Waiting Challenge...

Trout fishermen know Massachusetts as a state which offers a wide variety of first-rate fishing opportunities. There are rainbows, browns and brookies in an abundance of streams and ponds; there are sea-run browns and sea-run brook trout (salters). For those looking for trophy trout and a very special fishery, there are lake trout or togue. Their distribution is "holarctic" -- their native range extends across Canada into Alaska. It dips southward into the north central states and the northern parts of the north-eastern states too. But lake trout are not native to Massachusetts, although we presently have thriving populations on both Quabbin and Wachusett Reservoirs.

They are very special fish, these bronze-green to bluish-grey lakers that live in deep, cold waters. Being char, closely related to brook trout, they can be identified by their large size and by the irregular light spots which cover their head, body and fins. In Quabbin the average laker weighs in at  $4\frac{1}{2}$  lbs. and there are plenty of larger ones. For example, the state record for these deeply fork-tailed trout was set in 1980 by a 20 lb. 12 oz. laker taken from Quabbin's depths. How long the record will stand is anybody's guess as biologists sampling the population by tagging and releasing fish have found fish larger than that. In their native habitat they get even larger with Canadian records showing 40 pounders as almost common while the all-time record is an incredible 100 lbs.

Lake trout were introduced to Quabbin Reservoir by the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife in 1952. As the population grew, individuals swam down the aqueduct to Wachusett, establishing another population. During the mid-1960s the population declined drastically due to eradication of their principal forage, smelt and a severe drought which drained large portions of the reservoir, eliminating possible spawning habitat. So during the late 1960s, biologists began an active program to support the lakers. Regulations were tightened, additional fish were stocked including some which came from a special deep-water-spawning strain which would not be harmed by the drought. The smelt control program which has eliminated the lakers' food supply was terminated because special screens were installed to keep the smelt out of the water distribution system. Additional smelt were stocked to increase the available forage and restore a balance. The population responded well and by 1972 it was clear that the population was growing both at Quabbin and at Wachusett.

In both places, lake trout provide a special challenge to fishermen. Fishing is good in late April when anglers can troll for lakers anywhere in the still cold waters of the reservoir. It becomes even better when the smelt spawning run is at its peak (early May). Once the smelt -- and the predacious lakers -- have dispersed, fishing gets a bit harder but is still good. At this time, one must troll in 20-40 feet of water. By July and August, when the water is really warm, the lakers drop to 80-100 feet or even deeper. At that time they can be taken on live shiners or by trolling with spoons or spinners using a down-rigger or lead-core line to get the lure to the fish. It does take some know-how and, is a fishery best suited for those who are willing to study and have patience.

It is certainly worth learning about lakers and where the deep holes are for biologists report that the population is burgeoning, the fish are larger and heavy, looking like an angler's dream. Few sportsmen outside central Massachusetts ever take advantage of this outstanding fishery but both Quabbin and Wachusett are open (subject to special regulations) and the opportunity is waiting...

